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ABSTRACT

Many adult English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teachers and tutors, paid and volunteer alike, often have great difficulty finding the time, opportunity, and resources to get training in areas vital to adult instruction, such as principles of adult education and learning, second language acquisition theory, teaching methodology, and the use of technology in instruction. These challenges have contributed to recent interest in distance learning opportunities available via the Internet. This article examines the benefits and challenges of online professional development, surveys the range of options available to adult ESL teachers and tutors, and provides guidance in exploring and evaluating these options. Several Web sites are described and discussed. The details of online professional development opportunities are also examined, including discussion lists and chat groups, online newsletters and journals, available lessons, instructional activities, and curricula, staff development materials, Web sites of ESL organizations and institutions, and Web portals. The article concludes with a discussion of what is to be expected of online professional development in the future. Nine references are provided and 5 additional resources are suggested. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse For ESL Literacy Education) (KFT)

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ERIC Q & A

September 2000

National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education

ED 445 560

Online Professional Development for Adult ESL Educators

by William B. Hawk
National Institute for Literacy

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ERIC Q&A

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According to recent statistics, 70% of adult education programs funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) offer instruction to English language learners, and in 1998, nearly 2 million adults studied English in these programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). The need for teachers who can provide instruction to adult learners of English as a second language (ESL) is apparent. An increasing challenge in satisfying this need for teachers is providing effective and efficient pre- and in-service training and professional development opportunities to adequately prepare teaching staff.

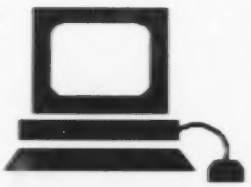
Providing professional development to adult educators can be difficult. The adult education field is marked by its part-time nature, limited resources, minimal certification requirements, high turnover, and limited research base (Tibbetts, Kutner, Hemphill, & Jones, 1991). These characteristics can create problems of access for teachers, and at the same time, complicate the design and implementation process for professional development planners. Many ESL teachers and tutors, paid and volunteer alike, often have difficulty finding opportunities for training in areas vital to adult instruction, such as principles of adult education and learning, second language acquisition theory, teaching methodology, and use of technology in instruction (Burt & Keenan, 1998).

These challenges have contributed to the recent interest in using distance learning as a practical way for teachers to strengthen their skills. More specifically, the advances made in Internet technology and the increasing accessibility of the Internet offer promise of additional professional development opportunities for adult ESL practitioners.

Online professional training and development options are increasing daily, as are practitioners' reasons and expectations for utilizing them. This Q&A examines the benefits and challenges of online professional development, surveys the range of options available to adult ESL teachers and tutors, and provides guidance in exploring and evaluating these options.

A number of Web sites are described and discussed in this article; however, the list is not exhaustive nor does this Q&A necessarily endorse any specific site. Furthermore, given the speed at which electronic resources change, there is no guarantee that the Web sites listed will be current after publication of this article. This is all the more reason for practitioners to learn how to evaluate and choose the best online professional development sources for their needs.

What are the benefits of online professional development?



Current research studies, though limited, suggest that online educational and enrichment activities are effective for well motivated learners, especially those who understand the format and nature of the online learning experience (Brown, 1998; Schrum, 2000; Warschauer, 1995). The studies also find that two benefits of online learning are the flexibility of real-time and any-time options and the convenience of communication options across wide geographic distances. Online opportunities can have an impact on a larger and more diverse audience than most professional development activities. Additionally, a by-product of online professional development may be learning about the technology and its applications while pursuing the subject matter of interest.

Because of the large number and variety of online professional development learning opportunities available, practitioners are likely to find a match for their specific needs, abilities, subject interests, and technical requirements. While sorting through so many options can be daunting, more sophisticated search engines and the development of the concept of Web portals that collect content around certain topics, are making information more quickly and easily accessible to Web users.

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The National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) funds a number of portals, called Special Collections, on topics of interest in the field of adult and family literacy, including adult ESL. (See **http://www.literacynet.org/esl** or the complete list of LINCS Special Collections at **http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/collections/collections.html**). These constantly changing sites find and disseminate new information on specific topics, providing links to instructional resources, professional development opportunities, news and events, and updates on current research.

What are the challenges of online professional development?

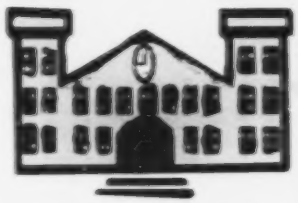
For many, the benefits of online professional development outweigh the disadvantages. However, there are challenges that should be considered.

- Most online training opportunities are designed to be used by individuals in diverse locations. Therefore, it is difficult to gauge how the training is used and its impact on the participants' professional development.
- Some practitioners will choose to conduct their professional development training together and in the same location. In these cases, the facilitator will need to modify the activities for group work.
- For-cost resources may include cumbersome registration procedures required for access to the materials and an unclear or inaccurate statement of what audience the materials are intended for.
- Some sites may require that users have the current generation of higher end technology and software.
- Cancelled courses or Web materials that are not kept up-to-date may be drawbacks for users seeking online professional development opportunities.
- Many Web-based resources are initially developed in print and then disseminated via the World Wide Web. They may be abridged versions of the real-time learning opportunities or simple dissemination of printed research articles or presentations made at conferences. To be most useful, the online environment should enable users to search for resources, compare and contrast them, and discuss topics even in basic print-like documents (Serim, 1996).

What types of professional development exist online?

Broadly speaking, there are two types of online professional development: Internet-based training and Internet resources. Internet-based training offers more structure in both the content and the delivery of the training, including the guidance of a facilitator or team of facilitators. Internet resources have a much broader definition and tend to be self-accessed and self-guided. Resources can include everything from online journal articles to real-time chats on specific topics to models for materials and curriculum development.

What Internet-based training options are available and what do they offer?



Online course work offered by universities is perhaps the most commonly recognized Internet-based training option. These offerings range from individual for-credit courses on a specific topic to sequences of courses that lead to certificates, master's, or doctoral degrees. Fees for the different courses vary, but many are comparable to the fees for on-campus courses. Courses may include a range of activities similar to those of off-line instruction, such as individual reading and writing assignments, online discussions and electronic bulletin board postings, and group projects.

Listed here are some universities that offer certificate and degree programs:

- The New School (New York City) **http://www.nsu.newschool.edu/english/index.html** or **http://www.dialnsa.edu/elt**
- Brigham Young University **http://humanities.byu.edu/Linguistics/TESOLGradPrograms.html**
- University of California, Los Angeles **http://www.onlinelearning.net**
- Newport Asia Pacific University **http://www.asiapacificu.edu**
- Pennsylvania State University's World Campus **http://www.worldcampus.psu.edu/pub/programs/adted/index.shtml**

There are also Internet-based training options available that do not offer college or university credit. Components of these courses—content, extent and form of participation, method of delivery, and cost—can vary widely and should be researched by the individual. While they are often as well constructed and delivered as the for-credit courses, their suitability in meeting teaching certification requirements or application to future degree programs should be investigated. Examples of such courses include the online education programs offered by Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) **http://www.tesol.org/edprg/index.html** and PBS LiteracyLink's LitTeacher **http://litlink5.pbs.org/litteacher**.

What Internet resources for professional development are available and what do they offer?

The range of Internet resources for professional development is extensive. These materials and resources can be selected and used by practitioners to meet their

immediate needs. They are not part of a larger structure or delivery plan, and they can be accessed and combined by the individual practitioner. Because of the number of online resources available, users need to take the time to search systematically or use appropriate Web portals to guide them. Examples of online professional development resources are listed below.

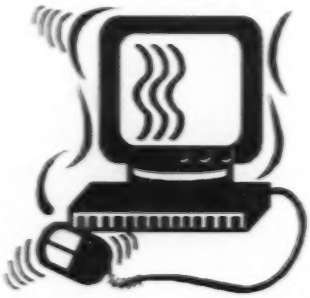
1. Discussion lists or chat groups provide practitioners with a low-cost (usually free) means of connecting with colleagues. These discussions and their archives can help practitioners share what they have learned, document their research and experiences, and generate data sets for further inquiry into how educators' classrooms work. These lists are also used to conduct inquiry projects and action research for professional development.

One electronic discussion group is NIFL-ESL: **http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/nifl-esl/english_second_language.html**. The National Institute for Literacy sponsors NIFL-ESL, which focuses specifically on adult ESL. Recent discussion threads (2000) have included topics such as native language literacy screening, the Literacy Summit 2000, and the use of dictionaries in the ESL classroom.

An example of a chat group is About.Com's chat room for adult/continuing education: **http://adulted.about.com/education/adulted/mpchat.htm**. Here participants discuss issues related to job benefits for adult teachers and career development.

2. Online newsletters and journals are publications usually created specifically for the Internet or modified for the Internet. Below are a few examples:

- *Focus on Basics* **http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~ncsall/fob/index.htm**, published by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL), gives practical suggestions for Adult Basic Education (ABE) and ESL practitioners;
- *Hands-on English* **http://www.handsonenglish.com** focuses exclusively on ideas for adult ESL practice; and
- *The Internet TESL Journal* **http://www.aitech.ac.jp/~iteslj/** offers articles on theory and practice for both ESL and English as a foreign language (EFL).



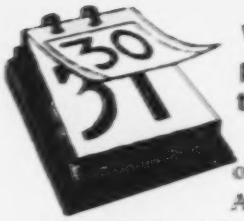
3. Lessons, instructional activities, and curricula are available online for immediate use, for use with minor modification, or for use as templates for lesson-plan development. Some, such as those included in the Adult Education ESL Teachers Guide by C. Ray Graham and Mark M. Walsh (**http://humanities.byu.edu/elc/Teacher/TeacherGuideMain**) or the previously mentioned *Hands-on English* site, have been developed especially for adult English language learners. Others, found in general lesson and activity banks, are not adult ESL-specific in design and would need to be modified for use in the adult ESL classroom. Two general lesson banks are Blue Web'N **http://www.kn.pacbell.com/wired/bluewebn/**, a library of Web-based tutorials, activities, and projects in all subject areas, for K-12 to adult learners, and Gateway to Educational Materials (GEM) **http://www.thegateway.org/**, a library of learning activities that includes a section on adult and vocational education. The WebQuest Page **http://edweb.sdsu.edu/webquest/webquest.html** helps education practitioners develop their own online lessons. It provides lesson templates and guidance on designing Web-based learning activities.

4. Staff development materials created by programs and organizations that provide off-line training opportunities for practitioners can increasingly be accessed online. The following organizations maintain sites for practitioners in adult education and adult ESL:

- California's Staff Development Institute **http://www.otan.dni.us/webfarm/sdi**
- Outreach and Technical Assistance Network (OTAN) **http://www.otan.dni.us**
- Texas Adult Education Professional Development and Consortium **http://www.tcall.tamu.edu/consort/services.htm**

5. Web sites of organizations and institutions in the field of adult ESL education often provide online resources that can further a practitioner's professional growth and skills, including research reports, journals, resource collections, and discussion forums. The National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE) **http://www.cal.org/ncle/**, the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) **http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~ncsall/**, the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) **http://www.nifl.gov/**, and the National Center for Adult Literacy (NCAL) **http://litserver.literacy.upenn.edu** are examples of organizations with Web sites that offer materials and links to resources that support a variety of practitioner training and learning objectives.

6. Web portals offer guidance and pointers to various professional development resources. NIFL LINCS ESL Special Collection **http://literacynet.org/esl/**, mentioned above, and About.Com's ESL pages on teacher training and professional development **http://esl.about.com/homework/esl/cs/teachertraining/index.htm** offer additional online pointers to teacher training courses and to ESL professional development resources like those discussed in this article.



What can be expected of online professional development in the future?

Challenges remain in the field of online professional development. Adult ESL instructors need more professional development on adult learning and language acquisition, ESL content, and multicultural instruction. Also, questions about the availability and quality of evaluation of online professional development have yet to be adequately addressed, as have concerns about the extent to which adult ESL practitioners are involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the various distance learning models.

However, advances in telecommunications technologies are rapidly expanding and enhancing the delivery of online professional development. It is difficult to determine which technologies will emerge as the most accessible, either in the value they will add to the delivery of online training or in the speed at which the supporting hardware and software can be acquired by users. While few quality uses of video and audio streaming for professional development exist at present, many leaders in the field of adult education are investigating its potential advantage to online training (Davis, 1999; Silc, 1998). The integration of online training with other delivery mechanisms like teleconferencing, computer software packages, or traditional workshops is also an area of continued exploration (M.C. Florez, August 2000, personal communication). The push to use information and communication technologies to enhance all forms of education will most likely result in greater strides in online professional development in the future. ✥

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